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Center for Persons With Disabilities

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Dr. Temple Grandin

Dr. Temple Grandin was diagnosed with autism as a child. She went on to have a successful career as a designer of animal handling systems. She is a worldwide advocate for both animal welfare and autism. She's the subject of an Emmy award-winning movie and numerous media interviews.

One thing she is not: vague.

"Don't get hung up on labels," she told a crowd at Utah State University last week. "These labels are around because doctors sat around a table arguing about them. They're not precise. They're behavioral profiles."

She shared some of her thoughts on neurodiversity and education to an estimated 800 attendees, who packed the Taggart Student Center ballroom and spilled into the Sunburst Lounge to hear her. The CPD was one of many organizations that sponsored her visit. It was part of our 40th Anniversary celebration.

Dr. Grandin emphasized that Autism Spectrum Disorder is a continuum. A completely nonverbal person might be on one end. She's pretty sure Steve Jobs belongs on the other, and half of Silicon Valley would fall in there somewhere.

That said, Grandin urged parents who suspect their child has autism to seek services early, while the children are still toddlers. She did not endorse one program or another, but she did emphasize the need for a patient, gently insistent teacher. Young children with ASD should be receiving 20 to 30 hours of one-on-one time with an instructor who keeps them engaged. She encouraged parents who can't afford the treatment to make use of grandparents and volunteers.

She has her own, insider's understanding of how ASD affects the senses. People on the spectrum may be super-sensitive to sounds, smells or textures. Florescent lights may appear to flicker, sounds can be physically painful, clothes might feel like sandpaper, words may appear to move on the page. Children on different parts of the spectrum will experience these issues to different degrees; one may be especially sensitive to sound while another may have issues with textures or visual perception. She suggested some ways to help the child adapt: Printing a worksheet on pastel paper, wearing tinted glasses, finding soft clothes with no tags, learning when to expect the sudden sound of a school bell.

Some behavioral problems are linked directly to sensory issues, and for a child who has them, certain environments (Walmart, for example) are terribly overstimulating. Just being there can provoke a tantrum. Dr. Grandin encouraged parents to help their children signal them when they've had enough of a difficult place.

Still, while some things can be done to make a child with autism more comfortable in his world, she worried that people on the ASD spectrum are missing the social training that could help them land a job. Turn-taking is emphasized less as children grow up in a video game world. So is politeness. "I think it's horrible that people on the higher end of the spectrum don't know how to shake hands."

Dr. Grandin highlighted expectations that were placed on her. She learned to take turns in hours of board game play. Good manners were emphasized. She was expected to serve hors-d'oeuvres without monopolizing the conversation. She was taught to greet people properly.

She also worried that higher-functioning children on the spectrum are missing some critical things in the schools. Autism—and overcoming it—may become so over-arching that the children, their teachers and their parents may forget to play up the child's strengths and use them as a springboard to develop more skills. Is the child fixated with trains? Have her read about them, write about them, draw them and use the knowledge she gains to learn more about a related topic.

She is also concerned with the trend to remove hands-on experiences from today's schools. Art and shop classes give students practical exposure to interesting things. They give the student a real-world understanding of how a project should come together. Those classes helped Dr. Grandin survive some rough high school years. Her skills in art and wood shop helped her prove what she already knew: she wasn't stupid. And in those classes, she didn't get teased.

Shared interests can open a door to social engagement. In addition, hands-on classes help a student make connections between how a project looks on paper and how it turns out in reality. Without that feedback they may be prone to some impractical mistakes. She credits a design for a 30-foot gate on a pig facility to a designer who only had a virtual understanding of drafting.

Dr. Grandin's very brain structure predisposes her to a literal, visual, less-verbal way of processing information. She uses her strengths to her advantage. Her visual thinking is not typical, but as she described it, it was easy to wonder what "neurotypical" really is. Every brain is different. The trick is getting them all to work together.